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Author: Dr. Robert Rosenthal

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The Relationship of the Founding Statements of the John E. Fetzer Institute to *A Course in Miracles*

By
Dr. Robert Rosenthal
Foundation for Inner Peace

Introduction and Intent

In 1975, John Fetzer was introduced by Judith Skutch to *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM), a powerful, metaphysical self-study system comprised of three volumes—a Text, Workbook for Students, and Manual for Teachers. The goal of the Course, in its own words, is “removing the blocks to the awareness of love’s presence, which is your natural inheritance.” Through study of the Text and diligent application of its daily Workbook Lessons, Course students increasingly learn to recognize, and eventually return to, their true nature, which is nothing less than purest love. When all blocks have been successfully removed (by the realization that they are illusory and never truly existed), there is no further impediment to complete, perfect and everlasting union with God.

ACIM was received through a channeled process of “inner dictation” taken down by Columbia University psychologist Helen Schucman, Ph.D. in collaboration with her colleague and supervisor, William Thetford, Ph.D. Dr. Schucman, born Jewish and an avowed atheist, nonetheless claimed that the voice whose words she faithfully recorded was that of Jesus of Nazareth. The entire scribing process, which began in October of 1965, took over seven years to complete. ACIM was published and widely disseminated by Judith Skutch (now Whitson), a close friend of John Fetzer’s and one of the original trustees of the Fetzer Institute. As of this date (May 2016), Judith continues to serve as

president of the Foundation for Inner Peace, the organization designated by Dr. Schucman to publish, disseminate and teach ACIM. Although ‘scribed’ in English, ACIM has been carefully translated into twenty-five different languages under the sponsorship and supervision of the Foundation for Inner Peace and its sister arm, the Foundation for A Course in Miracles. With several more translations underway, the mission of making ACIM accessible to as much of the world’s population as possible remains ongoing. To date, approximately three million copies have been sold or given away worldwide.

John Fetzer immediately recognized ACIM’s significance as one of the world’s most profound spiritual teachings. (The Course is very clear, however, that it is only one of many paths, and in this sense, neither exclusive nor unique.) He became one of its earliest students and remained dedicated to its principles and worldview throughout the remainder of his life. If one peeks inside his copy of the first hardback edition of the Text (published in 1976 and preserved in the Fetzer Memorial Trust library), nearly every line of every page is neatly underlined—for over six hundred pages! He confided to Judith Skutch Whitson that he had placed a copy of the Course within the foundation of the current institute building at the onset of construction to signify that his Institute rested soundly on its principles.

John Fetzer’s involvement with ACIM naturally carried over to influence the founding principles of his Institute. In the following essay, we will elaborate the core concepts of ACIM and explore their relationship to the Fetzer Institute’s statements of founding purpose, namely, the Meaning of Spirit, the Guiding Purpose, the Mission, and the Founding Assumptions. We will discuss the Course’s understanding of Spirit and God, its worldview, its very particular use of certain words and phrases (e.g., Son of God/Christ, Holy Spirit, ego, sin, atonement), its prescription for happiness, and the central role played by forgiveness (as the Course defines it) in freeing the mind from the chains of illusion and suffering and returning it to its true unitary nature in God. Indeed, the only meaningful service we can perform for any of our fellow human beings, according to ACIM, is learning to forgive. This in turn paves the way for miracles, true vision, and our ultimate awakening from the dream that constitutes physical reality. It is

our hope that through this essay those interested in John Fetzer and his Institute, but unfamiliar with ACIM, will come to a deeper appreciation of both.

Before we attempt to understand the Founding Statements in the context of ACIM's teachings, however, we must first have a basic knowledge of the worldview of the Course and its very specific but idiosyncratic use of certain terms.

The Worldview of *A Course in Miracles*

ACIM uses explicitly Christian language to teach a worldview that is far more akin to Advaita Vedanta than modern-day Christianity. (Bill Thetford liked to refer to ACIM as the Christian Vedanta.) According to this worldview, God is all that exists, ever and always, in an eternal present without past or future. God's is the only Reality, the only Truth. And the nature of God—God's essence or substance, if you will—is love, and nothing but love. Like love, God is not a physical entity. God does not have a body. God exists at the level of mind, and therefore so do God's Creations. Mind is the only reality. That which we deem to be physical and therefore *real* is in fact illusion.

God creates by extending the love that is God's Being to give rise to a new being. But this entity is in no way separate or distinct from God. It is identical to God in every respect, except for its origin. It was created; it is not its own creator. ACIM refers to this creation of God's as God's Son. (Scribed in the 1960s, there was not yet an awareness of gender bias in pronouns. Obviously, God can be neither masculine, feminine nor neuter, because these are all attributes of bodies, which belong to the physical world, not oneness.) Being identical to God, the Son of God also creates, and in the same manner as His Father, by extension of its being. As is evident, this is a far cry from the creation story of Genesis, which describes an anthropomorphic deity creating the physical universe and everything within it in a stepwise process of increasing complexity and differentiation.

Where in the teaching of ACIM does the physical universe enter into God's creation? The answer (also found in Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism) is that it does not. ACIM maintains that the physical universe within which we believe ourselves to be living has nothing whatsoever to do with God. God is love and eternal oneness, whereas this world is divided and subdivided into individual entities and discrete events—each

separate and self-contained—subject to the laws of cause and effect and under the influence of linear time. This world is *not* an extension of love (although love does exist within it; it is impossible to suppress truth entirely), therefore it is not like God, not of God, and not God’s creation. What is it, then? How do we explain our presence in a physical body within a material world if God did not create it?

In the Judeo-Christian mythology of the Book of Genesis, we are told the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Tempted by the serpent, Eve eats the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. She then convinces Adam to do the same. This becomes humankind’s “original sin,” resulting in expulsion from the paradise of Eden and banishment into a world of hardship: a world where survival is always in doubt and death lurks around every corner. The New Testament ameliorates this grim state of affairs by telling us the good news (“the gospel”) that God sent His only begotten Son into the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and through his bloody and painful sacrifice on the cross, all of our sins (including the original sin of Adam and Eve) have been absolved, providing we accept him as savior.

ACIM tells a parallel, but altogether different tale. Within the seamless Oneness of Love that constitutes God and His Son, there arose a thought of separation: a desire to be autonomous, self-created, other-than-God and apart from God. “Into eternity, where all is one, there crept a tiny, mad idea, at which the Son of God remembered not to laugh.”¹ Because the power of thought within the mind of God’s Son is so absolute, this “tiny, mad idea” of separation shattered the oneness of the Son, giving rise to an entire world premised on the notion that separation is both possible and real. “You do not realize the magnitude of that one error. It was so vast and so completely incredible that from it a world of total unreality *had* to emerge... to shatter knowledge into meaningless bits of disunited perceptions...”² It is noteworthy that this closely mirrors the Kabbalistic explanation for the creation of the world and its doctrine of *Tikkun Olam*, which prescribes the healing of the world through the repair of the shattered fragments of God’s Creation.

Here then is the ‘creation’ of the physical universe, created in the likeness of its ‘creator’: the separation from God. It is a world of disparate forms, of incomplete pieces blasted from wholeness; a world of time divided into past and future—seconds, hours,

days, weeks, years, millennia; a world of bodies obviously separate and distinct from each other, bodies which cannot truly join or unite in any meaningful way as mind does. Each body houses within its citadel of flesh a private mind that's seemingly unique and different from all other minds. It is this we call self. ACIM labels this tiny, separate, fragment of mind *the ego*. (Note that this is not the same as the Freudian ego.) Like the dream-world it inhabits, the ego is not real. It was not created by God and has no relation to God or love. It is an unfortunate byproduct of the separation—a sliver of fragmented consciousness posturing as if it were the whole of reality. In fact, the ego is an impostor, intent on maintaining the delusion of separation that brought it to life and that guarantees its primacy and its necessity. It has convinced us that without its help, we would surely perish.

In order to safely navigate the world of separation, the ego develops a keen sense of judgment predicated upon its past experience. It enshrines the past as the beacon that will guide it safely through the uncertain future. But no matter how clever and farsighted the ego's planning, it always comes to the same endpoint: death. The one constant in this world of separation is death. All things come to an end. Everyone we know and love will die, as will everyone and everything they know. The greatest civilizations tumble into dust. Life itself must eventually give way to death as entropy triumphs over order. In the ego's view, death becomes the ultimate proof that separation from God is real and loss inescapable.

With death at its side, the ego reduces God to impotence at best and non-existence at worst. This leaves the shattered Sons of God with the lingering belief that they have attacked God by separating, and that as a result God must be very angry with them. They are haunted by a primal guilt, the source of which they long ago pushed out of awareness. As a result, they live in fearful anticipation of the time when God will take His revenge and strike them down, inflicting punishment in the form of suffering and death. In this way, the ego manages to transform God from a Being of purest love into a vengeful and terrifying deity. Now the separation makes perfect sense. Who in their right mind would risk approaching such a fearsome, punitive god?

We have said that the separation is ACIM's equivalent to the Bible's Fall from Eden. From ACIM's perspective, eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

was not an awakening, but a drugged descent into a world of madness, dreams and illusion. “[T]he Bible says that a deep sleep fell upon Adam, and nowhere is there reference to his waking up.”³ There were no such concepts as “good” and “evil” until the separation brought them into being in the delusional mind of God’s Son. They have no reality because they are not of God. How can any part of oneness be ‘good’ or ‘bad’? Oneness is one; it has no divisions or parts. It merely *is*.

ACIM also differs from the Bible in considering the consequences of the separation. The Bible tells us that the Fall was a sinful act, giving rise to original sin and demanding punishment and expiation in the form of sacrifice. Jesus had to incarnate and die a gruesome death in order to save us from sin—but this works only if we accept his sacrifice. By contrast, ACIM maintains that there is no need for sacrifice or expiation, because *nothing really happened* (or more accurately, nothing real happened). The world surrounding us does not exist in God’s Reality, and that is the only reality. How can what lacks existence be sinful? A psychotic delusion may be terrifying to the patient experiencing it, but it remains unreal. Therefore, even the most heinous crimes as this world judges them—betrayal, murder, genocide—do not exist from the perspective of God’s reality and have no effect upon it, in the same way that our worst nightmares dissolve upon awakening. Yes, the nightmares of this world *do* exist *for us* at the level of the body and ego, because we believe in the body and ego. However, that changes nothing in God’s Reality. Therefore, the actions of this world cry out not for punishment or expiation, but for correction. And that’s what ACIM sets out to do.

ACIM tells us that the instant the separation seemed to take place in the mind of God’s Son, it was corrected by God, because it could not exist. It was not created—not an extension of love—but involuted: a mind peering inward to give birth to an entire world of illusion within which it loses all awareness of its true unitary nature. This is not sin. God was not insulted or angered by what could never occur. It was an error, and error calls for correction, not expiation. And so God provided the means of correction in the selfsame instant that the error appeared to take place. And it was corrected.

From our perspective, however, within the world of separation and linear time, God’s correction appears not to have happened, or to be very remote, unfolding at a snail’s pace. This is because when we identify with the ego and body, we are limited to

the world of the senses. Past and future seem very real, while the present—which truly is the only time that exists, even in this world—is fleeting, barely graspable. God exists in this eternal present, which is also therefore where His correction takes place. Until we shed the illusion of past and future and free ourselves from time, we will not be able to see that time is already over and we merely relive the instant of separation again and again. We are free to delay our awakening as long as we choose by continuing to invest in the ego and its world. Such is the nature of free will. But we cannot change the endpoint. We *will* awaken to our true nature—because it has already happened. Illusion cannot destroy Truth.

In Course terminology, the name given to God’s correction for the separation is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit bridges the gap between illusion and reality by reinterpreting the world of perception in such a way that we begin to recognize the oneness underlying multiplicity, the constancy of eternity behind a world enslaved to time and change, the ever presence of love and peace where fear and attack once reigned.

It is perhaps easiest to understand the Course’s notion of the Holy Spirit and how it works by way of a computer analogy. Think of the separation as the accidental downloading of a computer virus. You clicked on a link without really thinking about it and installed malware that caused your computer’s operating system to malfunction. You don’t know how to undo your error. The malware is now running your computer’s system software; you can’t escape it. Under the influence of this malware, whatever problem you now input into your computer, the answer you get is always wrong, bearing no relationship to reality. The Holy Spirit is an anti-viral program: a software patch. Once downloaded and installed, it offers a correction that undoes all errors resulting from the virus.

And just like an anti-viral program, we first have to recognize we’re getting bad results and then have to install and activate the Holy Spirit’s corrective software patch ourselves, by making a conscious decision. It won’t just happen. Where the analogy fails is that, unlike a computer, we must turn to Holy Spirit’s corrective software patch not once, but again and again each time we realize we’re running the old malware. Why? Because we are highly resistant to making this correction. We believe it’s unnecessary. The malware has us hoodwinked. The ego assures us that it knows how to find the right

answers and procure happiness; it doesn't need outside advice or meddling. And because we believe that the ego is our identity, we become fearful of anything that threatens it.

The idea of relinquishing the ego-self to a greater Self triggers fears of annihilation. The Holy Spirit is seen now as a threat, so we push Him away. But the moment we decide to use His blanket correction for the ego's malware, the results are nothing short of miraculous. Literally. We experience miracles. Our lives change. Our relationships shift from conflict to forgiveness and peace. Over time, these become increasingly convincing, allowing us to trust the Holy Spirit and to entrust more and more of our lives to His care. Through this gradual and gentle learning process, we learn to undo the consequences of the separation and remember truth.

ACIM calls this entire process, by which the separated sons of God correct their collective identity confusion, the Atonement. However, nothing is atoned for in the usual meaning of the word. Illusions are undone: that, and nothing more. (Many Course students prefer to pronounce the word "At-One-Ment," because it is the means by which we reawaken to the reality of our oneness.)

This process of undoing illusion is also how ACIM defines forgiveness. There is nothing *in* the world *to* forgive, because the world is not real. We can only forgive our illusions about our sisters/brothers and ourselves if we first recognize them as such. "Forgiveness recognizes what you thought your brother did to you has not occurred. It does not pardon sins and make them real. It sees there was no sin. And in that view are all your sins forgiven. What is sin, except a false idea about God's Son? Forgiveness merely sees its falsity, and therefore lets it go."⁴

The purpose of forgiveness then is not to address perceived slights or attacks within the world of perception, but rather, to undo the separation and all the illusions it gave rise to. We forgive ourselves for believing that we are limited beings—that we are an ego inside a body that must die, and not the holy Son of God. And we forgive our brothers and sisters for *our* mistaken perception of them as being the same. We learn to look past the body, the ego and the personality structure. Instead we behold the shining light of Spirit, present in everyone and the same in everyone. Thus our oneness is restored to us. ACIM calls this vision of oneness "Christ's Vision," because we no longer

‘see’ the illusion of separate beings and mistake it for reality. Christ’s Vision corrects perception as forgiveness corrects thought.

The Holy Spirit guides us toward forgiveness with extreme gentleness. The student progresses only as far and as fast as s/he is capable without triggering fear, because anything that increases fear would be counterproductive, driving us back into the arms of ego. Therefore, the lessons and stages of the Atonement are highly personal—custom crafted for each of us—and they will take as much time to learn as is necessary. If we contemplate how many centuries might be required to bring forgiveness to the mind of every human, well ... that could be a very long time indeed. But when we begin to practice forgiveness, we become conduits for miracles. According to ACIM, the miracle is a time saving device. Learning that might otherwise have required a thousand years takes place in an instant through the miracle. The Holy Spirit’s software patch makes this possible. In fact, to the Holy Spirit the sole purpose of time is to hasten the end of time through the implementation of the Atonement.

Once forgiveness is complete, we enter a state that ACIM calls *the real world*, that is, the world shorn of the ego’s fearful illusions. (Another name for this might be enlightenment.) When we have removed all barriers to the awareness of love’s presence, when not one illusion of the ego is cherished or defended, then it is as if the separation had never occurred. (Remember: it didn’t.) At this point, the Course tells us, God takes the final step and enfolds us back into His Being. When all the separated sons of God are restored to their true nature in God, the Atonement will be complete. Father and Son will be one again, as they have always been and will forever be.

Understanding Spirit, Experiencing Spirit

According to the Founding Statements of the Fetzer Institute, its Guiding Purpose is *to awaken into and serve Spirit....* But what is Spirit? How can we serve Spirit without first having some understanding of its nature? And what might such service look like? Before we can begin to speak of how to serve, we must attempt some understanding of the meaning of the word *Spirit*.

The Statement of Founding Purpose correctly asserts that *we can neither fully understand nor adequately describe Spirit*. This is so because the limited human mind

cannot comprehend the Unlimited, nor can mere words capture the pure, abstract essence of spiritual truth. At best, they can point in its direction. As the famous Zen koan so beautifully puts it: the finger pointing at the moon is not the moon. The words are never equivalent to the truth. Yet without that finger to point the way, we may never know such absolute truth exists, much less where and how to look for it. We may never pause amidst our busy lives to look up and enjoy that radiant moonlight (which is itself but a pale reflection of the glorious sun).

Words are the province of language, an abstract, symbolic representation of the world in which we live—a world of perception, of myriad forms—an apparent external reality that seems more real and compelling than the inner world of mind. Therefore, words are inadequate vehicles for describing that which is beyond perception, beyond the physical world, beyond all form—that is, Spirit. But words are what we have, so they will have to suffice.

ACIM points out that “a universal theology is impossible, but a universal experience is not only possible, but necessary.”⁵ The pitfall of words is that they can lead us astray, into the briar patch of theology: a dry intellectual attempt to define and describe Spirit. They are no substitute for direct experience. Because once we have achieved that, we no longer need the words—except to help convey to others what we have learned and open them up to their own experience of truth.

Keeping the centrality of experience in mind, let’s take a fresh look at the Statement of Guiding Purpose: that we must *awaken into and serve Spirit for the transformation of self and society*. Ultimately, we cannot serve Spirit without awakening to It, nor can we truly awaken without making the commitment to serve. The two turn out to be different faces of the same process: an inseparable unity rendered separate by language. We must embrace both.

Acknowledging the inadequacy of words to this task, we can proceed to look more closely at how *A Course in Miracles* deals with the term “Spirit.”

The Meaning of Spirit

In the first section of the “Clarification of Terms,” ACIM defines Spirit as that aspect of the mind that remains in full communication with God. It has never forgotten

the nature of its own unchangeable reality. Spirit is our true identity, unblemished by the ego.

ACIM Workbook Lesson 97 states: “Spirit am I, a holy Son of God, free of all limits, safe and healed and whole, free to forgive, and free to save the world.”⁶ If we are Spirit, created from the same stuff as God, then it must follow that we cannot be anything else other than spirit. We cannot be the physical bodies we inhabit, which change and age and die. We cannot be the personality structures with which we identify. We cannot be the relentless voice in our heads that delivers a running commentary on all we do and how we must do it in order to be successful and get the things we want while avoiding those we fear, like pain and death. Nor can we be our life stories: the accumulation of selected memories we recruit to define who we are and to better prepare us for the future with its dangers. According to ACIM, none of these are our true self. All are illusion, aspects of the limited ego, the dream byproduct of mind that believes itself separated from its Source. In this respect, ACIM is a close cousin of Buddhism and non-dual Vedanta Hinduism.

How does ACIM’s understanding of spirit compare with the Founding Statements of the Fetzer Institute? According to the Founding Statements, Spirit is *the deepest and most inclusive Ground of Being. Spirit is the Source of all that exists*. ACIM would agree whole-heartedly. Beyond Spirit, nothing exists—at least nothing real, because Spirit is all and everything. What could be more than everything? Or stand apart from the all and proclaim itself separate?

Love Creates Life

ACIM would also concur with the Founding Statement that *Spirit is the Love that creates and sustains life*. ACIM makes quite clear in many places that love is the essence of God. Indeed, the purpose of the Course, as stated in its Introduction, is “removing the blocks to the awareness of love’s presence, which is your natural inheritance.”⁷ Because God is love and nothing but love, and because nothing outside of God exists, all life must arise from this love and somehow reflect its presence. ACIM Workbook Lesson 167, titled “There is one life, and that I share with God,” comments that, “There are not different kinds of life, for life is like the truth. It does not have degrees. It is the one

condition in which all that God created share. Like all His Thoughts, it has no opposite.... There is no death because an opposite to God does not exist.”⁸ Life cannot create death, nor can the Limitless be limited in any way. Life can only create life, like itself, in its own image so to speak. It cannot be subverted into illusion or ended by death.

Because God’s essence is love, all life must come from love. ACIM Lesson 127 teaches that “There is no love but God’s.” Of course, not everything we call by the name of love is really love. Love is not like ice cream or ketchup; it does not come in different flavors or varieties. “Love is one. It has no separate parts and no degrees; no kinds nor levels, no divergencies and no distinctions. It is like itself, unchanged throughout. It never alters with a person or circumstance. It is the Heart of God, and also of His Son.”⁹ Lesson 229 reminds us, “Love, which created me, is what I am.” Stripped of the ego’s illusions, we discover that we are love and nothing but love.

It is the nature of God and love to expand, constantly and eternally: an ongoing, unceasing, explosive outpouring of love. God gives Himself in His entirety to His Creation, His Son. Nor does this giving in any way diminish God’s Being. Just the opposite. Love, by giving itself entirely, increases. The laws of God and love are the opposite of the zero-sum rules of this world, where the giver appears to lose and the receiver to gain at the giver’s expense. In the reality of God and love, nothing can be lost, ever.

This is the case because God is an idea, not a physical entity. Give away an object or a thing and you no longer have it. But when an idea is shared, even in this world, it grows. It belongs to both giver and receiver, and in equal measure. Because God created us, we are also an idea, an idea in the mind of God. One of ACIM’s basic tenets is that “ideas leave not their Source.”¹⁰ As an idea of God’s, we cannot separate or be separated from God. The separation (or Fall) could never have occurred except as an insane dream in the mind of the Son. Despite this insanity, we are the same as God in our essence: created by love, with love, from love, as love.

However, as long as we remain asleep within the dream, we will not be able to understand the love that created us.

You who identify with your ego cannot believe God loves you.... You project onto the ego the decision to separate, and this conflicts with the love you feel for the ego because you

made it. No love in this world is without this ambivalence, and since no ego has experienced love without ambivalence the concept is beyond its understanding.¹¹

As we practice removing the blocks to our awareness of love, we naturally begin to see ourselves and others in the light of love—as Spirit—as God created us. This idea is so fundamental to ACIM that the only Workbook lesson to be repeated (and not just twice, but three times!) is: “I am as God created me.”¹² We remain Spirit, the child of God, created not “in His image”—because God has no form, no body, no image—but in and from God’s Essence.

Faith Traditions and Spirit

Another of the Founding Statements regarding the meaning of Spirit states that *Spirit is the common source of the world’s faith traditions*. ACIM would agree, for the reason that Spirit is the only truth. But although Spirit lies at the core of these traditions, it can all too easily be obscured by dogma and theological considerations, as discussed previously. Differences in wording, use of idioms and cultural traditions—even mistakes in translation—wind up obscuring the commonality of Spirit among different faiths. Could Christian or Muslim fundamentalists really argue that their God is the only true God, and not the God of the other, if they knew that the Aramaic word for God, the word spoken by Jesus of Nazareth, was *Allah-ha*? Behind the words, all faith traditions point towards the same truth. (Thus, the writings of mystics from all traditions are remarkably similar, even though the theologies from which they spring can conflict dramatically.) These faith traditions are merely different fingers, pointing from different locations in space and time, at the same moon.

Spirit Gives Birth the Universe

According to the Founding Statements, *Spirit is the infinite, creative energy that gives birth to the universe*. Does ACIM support this contention? Well, yes, and no. If by “universe” we mean the one reality that is God and God’s Creations (a uni-verse), then ACIM is in full agreement. In fact, ACIM itself distinguishes between the terms “universe,” which is the true creation of God, and “world,” which is not. But if by

universe we mean the common understanding of planets, stars, galaxies, and all they contain, then no, ACIM would disagree. The universe (as conceptualized by a physicist or astronomer) is just another, more comprehensive term for the world of illusion. Therefore, “the infinite creative energy” of God and Spirit did not give birth to it and has nothing whatsoever to do with it.

Although this may seem like a fine point, it is not. It is central to understanding the Course. Spirit is in us and of us, eternal and unchanging. But the physical universe arises from our projection of the separation outward in an attempt to escape the guilt and responsibility for having done such a seemingly terrible thing to God. The world, like the ego that made it, is fickle, unpredictable, alternately alluring and dangerous. It cannot be the creation of a God of love and eternal oneness.

Guiding Purpose

As we saw earlier, the Guiding Purpose of the Fetzer Institute is to *awaken into and serve Spirit for the transformation of self and society*. This awakening is grounded in certain key principles—the unitary nature of reality, the absolute freedom of spirit, and unconditional love—and it unfolds through a balanced *integration of the inner life of mind and Spirit with the outer life of service and action*.

As previously noted, the purpose of ACIM is “removing the blocks to the awareness of love’s presence, which is your natural inheritance.”¹³ ACIM also states that “the sole responsibility of the miracle worker is to accept the Atonement for himself.”¹⁴ In practice, these amount to the same thing. By accepting the Holy Spirit’s plan of Atonement (the antiviral software patch), we allow Him to remove the ego’s obstructions to awareness of Spirit. As a consequence, love and miracles increasingly enter into our experience until they become our consistent reality.

When we accept our part in the master plan of Atonement, all the rest falls into place automatically. We literally “need do nothing.”¹⁵ This doesn’t appear to make sense at first, not until we recognize that all action, all striving, must somehow involve the physical body or its extensions. The very nature of action presupposes an actor who carries out the action and some other agency that’s acted upon. The actor and acted upon are necessarily separate from each other, and therefore both reflect and reinforce the idea

of separation. (Remember, in the Mind of God only oneness exists.) Therefore, when ACIM says that we “need do nothing,” it’s not so much that by accepting the Atonement we sit on our hands and abdicate any role whatsoever in helping others. Rather, it’s that we recognize the futility of any action undertaken under the ego’s guidance. Instead, we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us to those people and situations where we can be the most helpful in furthering the plan of Atonement. “Certain pupils have been assigned to each of God’s teachers and they will begin to look for him as soon as he has answered the Call. They were chosen for him because the form of the universal curriculum that he will teach is best for them in view of their level of understanding.”¹⁶

This gives rise to a very different understanding of the concept of *service*. The master plan does not come from us. Any self-directed action *we* might choose in order to be of service is likely to reflect an ego need or desire, even if we are not consciously aware of it. However well-intentioned, self-directed action at best will be limited in its impact; at worst, it will backfire or fail altogether. This is because self-directed action must necessarily reinforce the ego’s worldview of separation, arising as it does from a fundamentally mistaken understanding of the nature of self and other.

Action guided by Spirit is the only form of service that can ever be truly effective, because Spirit knows our true Self and always ‘acts’ in the best interests of that collective Self. This casts the Founding statement of Guiding Purpose in an entirely new light. *The integration of the inner life of mind and Spirit with the outer life of service and action* is not simply a good idea; it is the very essence of true service. Unless we begin with the inner—with Spirit’s plan and not our own—cleaning up our own house first so to speak, in order that we may receive Spirit’s guidance willingly and clearly—our actions are likely to be misguided. We drive without any sense of direction; we build lacking a blueprint; we toss ingredients together with no regard for the final dish or to whom it will be served. If we are to be agents of real change, we must first shift our own perception of people and events to better align with Spirit. Whatever then follows will be right-action.

Consciousness Shapes Reality

The first of the Founding Assumptions addresses exactly this point. *We recognize that consciousness participates in shaping reality.* This is true, but ACIM would say that

it doesn't go far enough. Consciousness doesn't just *participate* in shaping what we call reality. It is *entirely* responsible for it. Without consciousness, there is no external, objective reality to be shaped. We are the ones who dreamed this dream of separation, so of course we can shape it and ultimately learn to awaken from it altogether.

*I am responsible for what I see.
I choose the feelings I experience, and I decide upon the goal I
would achieve.
And everything that seems to happen to me I ask for, and receive
as I have asked.*¹⁷

Many popular spiritual teachings offer instruction on how to manifest exactly what your heart desires: your ideal mate, job, dream home, etc. And these can be effective—to a point. But this sort of shaping of reality gets us nowhere as far as the Atonement is concerned. It's a tease. It holds forth the false promise that we have the ability to fulfill our worldly desires and that when we do, we will be happy. Write out your bucket list. Go for it! There's just one problem. Anyone who's lived long enough knows that the achievement of any worldly goal, however compelling, brings only temporary joy. Life goes on, tossing ever new desires our way. Choice among illusions turns out to be no choice at all.

The truth is, our ego minds don't know what will make us happy. And what we think brings happiness will always disappoint eventually. Lottery winners all too often squander their fortunes and wind up back where they started. The greatest love affairs and the greatest empires all succumb in time to loss and death. This is the fundamental truth underlying Eastern teachings on non-attachment. The Buddha's First and Second Noble Truths tells us that all life is *dukkha*—dissatisfaction, suffering—and that the root cause of this dissatisfaction is thirst, craving, attachment—in a word, *desire*. Thus, the attempt to shape 'reality' according to our wishes only winds up strengthening the dream and its power over us, because we've invested our faith in its illusions—and that turns out to be a poor investment indeed.

However, if our desire—our only desire—is to awaken from the dream and be free of it, then we can find lasting happiness. Within the prison house of the ego-mind, we may crave a softer mattress, better food, safety from assault, a sunny day, fame, fortune, sensual pleasures, etc. But these do not set us free. Better by far to escape from

prison altogether. Or best of all, to discover that our sentence has been commuted—that we’ve been pardoned by the highest court—in fact, that we were pardoned the instant we believed we were convicted, and could have walked out of prison at any time we chose. We simply didn’t see that as an option; we were too distracted by the ego’s false goals within its prison walls. We were too attached.

ACIM states, “Tolerance for pain may be high, but it is not without limit. Eventually everyone begins to recognize, however dimly, that there *must* be a better way.”¹⁸ The plan of Atonement is that better way. Under Holy Spirit’s guidance, we walk the path to freedom. In so doing, we change the dream of suffering and desire to one of forgiveness and peace. Eventually, this becomes so much the norm that no further obstacles remain to keep us from God and we awaken completely. “You will first dream of peace, and then awaken to it.”¹⁹

When we awaken, however, it’s not for ourselves alone, but for everyone, because we now recognize that they are also part of our one Self. We could no more escape and leave them behind than we could abandon our children, or ourselves. “The lonely journey fails because it has excluded what it would find.”²⁰ This teaching distinguishes ACIM from the traditional Vedanta path and its goal of personal awakening, and aligns it more closely with Buddhism and the concept of the bodhisattva: the enlightened being who vows to reincarnate into the ego’s dream-world of suffering again and again, for as long as it takes, until every sentient being has achieved liberation from illusion. Oneness is for everyone—by definition. No one gets there on their own. “I am alone in nothing. Everything I think or say or do teaches all the universe... It is therefore in my power to change every mind along with mine.”²¹ Or, “When I am healed I am not healed alone. And I would share my healing with the world, that sickness may be banished from the mind of God’s one Son, who is my only Self.”²² This then becomes the truest and greatest form of service: to awaken the self in order to awaken the Self.

Unity Underlies Diversity

Traditional notions of service are hampered by the failure to recognize this quintessential unity of Self in which all minds are interconnected. This is addressed in Founding Assumption 3: *We affirm the unity that underlies diversity.* Behind the myriad

forms of the world in which we live, there is really only unity—in ACIM’s terms, the unity of God and His Son. As we have seen, the mistaken assumption that we are distinct selves with private minds housed in separate bodies becomes the greatest obstacle to truly being of service. We choose to help, but do so according to *our* plan, not that of Spirit. One body renders service unto another who is seen as different. Giver and receiver are not equal.

By contrast, ACIM teaches that “to give and to receive are one in truth.”²³ This is because “All that I give is given to myself,”²⁴ that is to say, there is no ‘other’—no one else outside of and apart from you to whom anything can be given. The illusion of billions of disparate selves each pursuing its own life agenda is the byproduct of the ego and its imagined separation from God. In the oneness of God’s Reality, there is only “one Self, at one with every aspect of creation.”²⁵ Anything given by any aspect of that Self must be received by that same Self. It cannot be otherwise.

Further, when we recognize that our fundamental nature is spirit—mind, not body—then there is nothing that we *can* give except what we *are*. And what we are, according to ACIM, is love and only love. “Love, which created me, is what I am.”²⁶ Love belongs to everyone. It is our universal birthright. And as discussed previously, being of God, love obeys the laws of God; it gives without losing anything in the transaction. In fact, love *gains* by the act of giving, because the result is *more* love for *both* giver and receiver. Love reinstates the remembrance of our underlying unity and thereby dissolves the barriers that maintained the illusion of separation. When we give love, no matter the form, we render true service, ultimate service.

The Awareness of Love

The primacy of love in ACIM is reflected in Founding Assumption 4: *We seek to foster awareness of the Spirit of love in our personal relationships in a community of freedom.* This Founding Assumption attempts to make clear that the love we must seek in our personal relationships is the love that is Spirit and not the many emotions that masquerade under the banner of “love,” but which are really just ways of bestowing specialness on one person to the exclusion of others. Of course, we do love some people more than others. However, that is because we are still identified with the body and the

ego, according to ACIM. Were we to know love as it truly is, we would love everyone fully and equally. “You cannot enter into real relationships with any of God’s Sons unless you love them all and equally. Love is not special.”²⁷

Although our love is still imperfect and inconsistent, when we make the decision to “teach only love,”²⁸ our personal relationships undergo a profound transformation. Those whom we once found off-putting or downright despicable reveal another, heretofore unknown side. Behind their unpleasant personality traits or hurtful deeds we now glimpse a commonality, a mutual desire for love. Terrible affronts and even outright attacks no longer wound us. Viewed through the lens of love, we see them for what they are: expressions of suffering that cry out for love. (After all, only a lack of love could have produced such bad behavior.) Freed from our grievances, we can let go and respond not with vengeful counterattack, but with forgiveness. And when we do, what we thought was a difficult relationship transforms in ways we never could have anticipated. Our forgiveness lets us see it in the light of Spirit. The result is a holy relationship. “The holiest of all the spots on earth is where an ancient hatred has become a present love.”²⁹

When we give love, there are no limits. Love is always maximal, because it does not come from the world of separation, but from God, from oneness. We need not even be physically present to give love, as documented in studies on the healing power of prayer. Our ability to love without object or agenda is what gives rise to miracles as ACIM understands them. “Miracles occur naturally as expressions of love. The real miracle is the love that inspires them. In this sense, everything that comes from love is a miracle.”³⁰

By learning to let go of the grievances we hold against others and seeing only love in everyone and everything, we become Spirit’s agents here on earth. We become conduits for miracles. Jesus and the Holy Spirit distribute these miracles according to the plan of Atonement wherever and to whomever they will be most useful. (We don’t have access to that knowledge, nor do we need to; it would only feed our egos.) This is how the plan of Atonement unfolds: one mind awakens another through love and forgiveness, and that mind in turn awakens others, and still others, in a chain of At-One-Ment that leads finally to the realization that there never were separate minds, only the one Mind of God and His Son, which knows nothing but love.

This understanding helps to make sense of Founding Assumption 2: *We recognize that social transformation depends on personal transformation.* Ultimately, all relationships are personal. Society is merely the collective nexus of all such relationships. To attempt to achieve societal transformation from the top down by enacting laws or formulating social policy becomes a fool's errand. Yet we can, and must, transform society; we do so one relationship at a time. ACIM tells us that "the Holy Spirit's temple is not a body, but a relationship."³¹ Within the dream of separation, relationship is the fundamental unit of change. Heal one difficult relationship and the effect will ripple out through many others, because minds are joined. Allow love into one dark unloving corner of relationship and you begin the process of societal transformation.

Coming full circle then, this is how we render true service—by learning to see only love in everyone we encounter, thereby making that encounter a holy one. It also happens to be the fullest expression of the Fetzer Mission Statement: *Helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world.* Funding projects that foster love and forgiveness is a worthy and necessary endeavor. However, the level at which real change occurs is the personal. A true spiritual foundation cannot rest on any one individual or project per se, or on an abstraction like an organization, however well intentioned. The foundation is built up one relationship at a time—each made holy again by virtue of the mutual awareness of love's presence, such that "ancient hatreds" are transformed into "present love."

Lastly, it should be noted that when we accept the Atonement for ourselves and learn to see in our fellow humans the love and light of oneness, we fulfill the Guiding Purpose from the Founding Statements. We awaken into Spirit and simultaneously serve It. We give service by tending to our own minds in the practice of forgiveness and we awaken by seeing the results of our forgiveness manifested in others. "Your brother is the mirror in which you see the image of yourself."³² Thus, we awaken to spirit as we help others awaken; we recognize wholeness by sharing our own experience of wholeness with those we once saw as separate; we remember unconditional love by sharing the unconditional love of Spirit with everyone we encounter. We serve them by serving ourselves, and we serve ourselves by serving them, all orchestrated by Spirit under its perfect plan of Atonement.

Conclusion: ACIM and John Fetzer

Clearly, we cannot do justice to a work as monumental as ACIM in a brief essay such as this. Within the span of its 1249 pages, ACIM makes use of many concepts we have not had time to touch upon to drive home its fundamental message of love and forgiveness. It addresses the ego's fondness for specialness and special relationships, its use of sickness as a defense and the true nature of healing, the transformative power of the holy instant, and the real meaning of idol worship, to cite just a few examples. But we hope here to have conveyed something of the essence of the Course's teachings and that the reader will be inspired to pursue these further on her own.

The Founding Statements of the Fetzer Institute synthesize the fundamental teachings of ACIM and adapt them in ways that make them accessible and actionable to those who might otherwise never have known of *A Course in Miracles*, much less undertaken its study. John E. Fetzer, by establishing his Institute and infusing it with the principles of the many spiritual systems he mastered, including the Course, achieved what the Course asks of us all: to accept and fulfill our own unique function in Spirit's plan of Atonement, and in so doing, to recognize that our only purpose, our only reality, lies in unconditional love.

ENDNOTES

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¹ ACIM, Text Ch.27,VIII.6:2

² Text, Ch.18.I.5:2-6

³ Text, Ch.2.I.3:6

⁴ ACIM Workbook, Part II-2.1:1-6

⁵ ACIM Clarification of Terms, Introduction. 2:5

⁶ Workbook, Lesson 97.7:2

⁷ Text, Intro.1:7

⁸ Workbook, Lesson 167.1:1-6

⁹ Workbook, Lesson 127.1:3-7

¹⁰ Text Ch.26.VII.4:7

¹¹ Text, Ch.4.III.4:1-3,5-8

¹² Workbook Lessons 94,110,162

¹³ Text, Intro.1:7

¹⁴ Text, Ch.2.V.5:1

¹⁵ Text, Ch.18.VII.5:5

¹⁶ Manual for Teachers.2.1:1

¹⁷ Text, Ch.21.II.2:3-5

¹⁸ Text, Ch.2.III.3:5-6

¹⁹ Text, Ch.13.VII.9:1

²⁰ Text, Ch.14.X.10.7

²¹ Workbook, Lesson 54.4:2-6

²² Workbook, Lesson 137.14:3-4

²³ Workbook, Lesson 108

²⁴ Ibid, Lesson 126

²⁵ Workbook, Lesson 95.11:2

²⁶ Workbook, Lesson 229

²⁷ Text, Ch.13.X.11:1-2

²⁸ Text, Ch.6.I.13:2

²⁹ Text, Ch.26.IX.6:1

³⁰ Text, Ch.1.I.3:1-3

³¹ Text, Ch.20.VI.5:1

³² Text, Ch.7.VII.3:8